

VZCZCXRO7847
RR RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNN
DE RUEHPF #0705 2601005
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 171005Z SEP 09
FM AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1192
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS PHNOM PENH 000705

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [CB](#)

SUBJECT: DEMOCRACY DAY HIGHLIGHTS IMPORTANCE OF FREEDOM OF
EXPRESSION IN CAMBODIA

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: During a seminar on democracy and tolerance in Cambodia organized by the Cambodian National Assembly, opposition politicians and government officials debated the progress achieved to date in consolidating Cambodia's democratic gains. The seminar successfully highlighted the importance of freedom of expression, which has come under attack in recent months via the use of defamation and disinformation suits against outspoken critics of the government. END SUMMARY.

Democracy and Political Tolerance

12. (U) The Cambodian National Assembly commemorated International Democracy Day September 15 with a day-long parliamentary seminar on "Democracy and Political Tolerance." The seminar included representatives from five political parties, human rights activists, diplomats, development partners, and media. Topics discussed included political tolerance and freedom of speech, inclusiveness in decision making, and a session moderated by Ambassador Rodley on the role of Parliaments in strengthening democracy.

13. (SBU) President of the National Assembly Heng Samrin highlighted Cambodia's democratic progress, noting that eight separate national and subnational elections had included participation of 50 political parties since democracy returned to Cambodia 1993. He also stressed the interconnectedness of democracy and respect for human rights. Om Yentheng, President of the Cambodian Human Rights Commission, asserted that Cambodian culture supports human rights, including women's political participation, and promotes a culture of tolerance.

An Exercise in Freedom of Expression

14. (SBU) However, opposition politician Sam Rainsy was quick to criticize the government's track record. He sarcastically applauded the government for successfully creating the appearance of democracy in Cambodia, and accused the National Assembly of serving merely as a "rubber stamp" for government policies. He criticized the state of democracy, citing the recent spate of lawsuits against opposition politicians and critics of the government.

15. (SBU) In response, CPP Chairman of the National Assembly commission on foreign affairs Chheang Vun stressed that democracy is not only about rights, but also entails obligations. While acknowledging the still imperfect nature of Cambodia's democracy, he asserted that Cambodia has made significant progress and continues to make democratic gains, as evidenced by the peaceful national elections in 2008.

16. (SBU) Several Chiefs of Mission, including the UK, Australian, and German Ambassadors, joined Ambassador Rodley in moderating the discussions in an effort to promote equal participation from members of the CPP, opposition parties, civil society, and media. The diplomats and development partners each stressed the important role

constructive criticism plays in a healthy, vibrant democracy.

COMMENT

[17](#). (SBU) Opposition parties and civil society representatives have been critical of the National Assembly's rules and regulations, in light of the CPP's outright majority following the 2008 national elections, which they assert restrict the ability of minority parties to effectively participate in Parliamentary discussions and debate issues. The seminar organizers, the National Assembly and UNDP, specifically sought Ambassadorial moderators to ensure that all sides would be afforded the opportunity to participate and air their opinions openly and freely. This unique arrangement provided a valuable lesson and opportunity to highlight the importance of tolerance and freedom of expression in strengthening Cambodia's democracy.

RODLEY